

UNITED STATES INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM:
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF POLICY AND DECISION-MAKING

An abstract of a Thesis by
Richard P. Liefer
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Drake University
Adviser: C. Walter Clark

The United States intervened in South Vietnam in an attempt to prevent formation of a communist state there. The intervention was a failure; the country came under communist control. This thesis describes and analyzes the goals and policies of American intervention during the period 1950 through mid-1968.

United States-Vietnam Relations: 1945-1967, the Pentagon Papers, served as the primary source for defining the goals and policies. The writings of Bernard Fall were used to evaluate them. An operational definition of intervention proposed by James N. Rosenau was a framework for discussion. Rosenau defined intervention as an action that breaks sharply with the past and is directed at a nation's authority structure.

The intervention was predicated on an assumption that monolithic communism threatened to spread over all of Indochina. The fear of communism was exaggerated. A more significant factor was the potency of Vietnamese nationalism, but this was not appreciated by American policy-makers. They followed outmoded concepts of containment and relied too much on conventional military tactics that were incompatible with the political nature of the internal war in Vietnam.

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Richard P. Liefer

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by

Richard P. Liefer

Approved by Committee:

C. Walter Clark

Chairman

Elsworth P. Woods

Charles A. Nelson

Sandra L. Campbell

Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

At 7:45 a.m. April 30, 1975, an American helicopter landed on the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon, South Vietnam. It had come to pick up the last remnants of the official United States presence in Vietnam: eleven Marines, the final defenders of the embassy. Most other Americans who wanted to leave had been evacuated the previous day. South Vietnam had effectively come under the control of North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (the PRG, or Viet Cong). With the exit of the eleven Marines, the United States ended its interventionary role in Vietnam. The intervention had been a failure; it had not prevented the demise of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).¹

Vietnamese society had been all but destroyed in the American effort to preserve a South Vietnamese political establishment acceptable to the United States. French colonialists had swept away the historical Vietnamese state and the village-based society. The Americans destroyed what remained as the essence of Vietnam: the land and the family. Many people, including civilians, died in the fighting, and various American and American-instigated programs removed many others from their land.

¹Tiziano Terzani, Giai Phong! (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 84.

And the revolution continued, all the way through the denouement in the spring of 1975.¹

Though Americans stayed in Vietnam that long, there was a crucial turning point in their intervention seven years earlier. In a sense, an end was reached in early 1968, in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. The offensive, a well-planned move by North Vietnamese Army troops and Viet Cong insurgents, was the high point of the military action in the Second Indochina War. It was a simultaneous surprise attack on nearly every city, town and major military base in South Vietnam.²

The Tet Offensive taught Americans that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army had not been weakened by years of fighting American troops and enduring American air bombardment. The American public became persuaded that the enemy could not be defeated; it no longer believed the Johnson administration's optimistic appraisals to the contrary.³

The American government reversed its military policy after the Tet Offensive. It put new limits on U.S. participation. At the beginning of March, 1968, the government was considering raising the number of American troops in Vietnam from 510,000 to more than 700,000; removing restrictions that had prevented the ground war from spreading into Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam, and lifting the remaining restraints on the bombing of Hanoi, Haiphong and other strategic targets.

¹Frances FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1972), p. 429.

²Don Oberdorfer, Tet! (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), p. ix.

³Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam: A Political History (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 505.

By the end of March, all of these proposals had been scrapped. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the military commander in Vietnam, had been reassigned to the Pentagon, President Johnson had said he would not seek re-election, and the U.S. bombers had stopped operations over most of North Vietnam.¹

Of course, the war did not end abruptly. President Nixon continued it, introducing Vietnamization as his contribution to the history of American involvement in Vietnam. Yet Nixon was able to go on with the war only by progressively reducing the number of American troops (and therefore casualties), and by lowering the level of U.S. expenditures. His emphasis on "peace with honor" helped win public support for his policies, too; the catch-phrase was appealing to many for the face-saving it connoted. But a corner had been turned and America was on its way out of Vietnam after the Tet Offensive.²

This is not to minimize the carnage that occurred after 1968: the Christmas, 1972, air raids on North Vietnam, for example. But after 1968 American objectives were altered. They became more closely aligned with the resources required to achieve them. Strategy was modified because the political and material costs of attaining the original objectives were considered to be too high. Policy-makers realized the United States could not destroy the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong nor eliminate them completely from South Vietnam.³

The Tet Offensive will be the end mark of this thesis as well. The thesis will attempt to describe and analyze the goals and policies of

¹Oberdorfer, p. 280.

²Oberdorfer, p. x.

³Douglas Kinnard, The War Managers (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977), p. 24.

American intervention in Vietnam up to that time. The focus will be on the content and efficacy of the interventionist policy.

United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, commonly known as the Pentagon Papers, will be the primary source used in defining the goals and policies of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The Pentagon Papers constitute a unique, quasi-official record. The multi-volume study was done at the behest of then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who directed that the study be encyclopedic and objective. The Papers were prepared in secret in 1967-68 by thirty-six people from the military services, the departments of state and defense and civilian think-tanks.¹

"An extended internal critique based on the documentary record," the Papers present a middle-echelon, official view of United States intervention in Vietnam. The authors did not have full access to the files of the Department of State, the president or Central Intelligence Agency. Therein lie some of the Papers' limitations.²

An evaluation of the goals and policies that marked U.S. intervention in Vietnam will be based on the data and analysis in the extensive writings of the late French-American historian, Bernard Fall. Fall had an abiding interest in Vietnam from at least the early 1950s until his death in 1967. One of the earliest authorities on Vietnam, Fall

¹U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Hearing, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess., September 20, 1971 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), p. ix.

Future references to this source will use the common term, Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., and include Book (Bk) number, section, subsection and page numbers.

²Neil Sheehan and others, The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. xix.

Future references to this source will be as follows: Pentagon Papers, Times ed., page number.

wrote seven books and hundreds of articles on aspects of the subject, which he knew first-hand because of his visits to the country. He was killed on his sixth trip there.¹ Fall's expertise makes his analysis valuable in its own right, and his independent-scholar orientation makes his writings useful in evaluating the Pentagon Papers. Fall's views definitely are not quasi-official.

Before a discussion of American goals and policies in Vietnam can go any further, it is necessary to designate a starting point. When did the U.S. interventionary role begin? Answering that question requires an operational definition of intervention.

Intervention has to do with modifying the behavior of persons and groups in another nation in a way that would not have occurred in the absence of the intervening nation's activities. Intervention is a success when the modifications come about, a failure when they do not. Influence, then, is at the heart of intervention.

Measuring influence, however, is extremely difficult. Changes in political behavior must be charted, and the changes must be related to a set of actors. The risk is that the behavior might have taken place in any case, without attempts to induce it. Any number of factors can and are involved in behavior modification. It is little wonder then that intervention, an international influencing mechanism, has so far tended to defy scientific inquiry.

James N. Rosenau insists that scientific analysis of intervention should be tried nevertheless, because interventions are real-life phenomena. They engage the minds and talents of policy-makers and

¹Bernard Fall, Last Reflections on a War (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 9, 10.

citizens. They cost money and often lives. In short, they are a problem of world politics. To help develop a scientific theory of intervention, Rosenau has suggested that an intervention can be identified by two traits: its convention-breaking nature and its authority-oriented character.

The first of these characteristics highlights widespread agreement on the finite and transitory nature of interventions. Virtually all the historical cases cited in the literature are conceived to have a beginning (when conventional modes of conduct are abandoned) and an end (when conventional modes are restored or the convention-breaking mode becomes conventional through persistent use). Their consequences for the target society may be profound and enduring, but once the consequences become accepted and established, the behavior is no longer regarded as interventionary even if the presence of the intervening actor in the target society remains undiminished.

Sharp breaks with conventional patterns are not called interventions, Rosenau maintains, unless they are political; that is, convention-breaking behavior must be "addressed to those who make the decisions that are binding for the entire society and/or to the processes through which such decisions are made." Both characteristics are necessary to identify an intervention.

A principal virtue of this operational definition of intervention is that it narrows the subject to a manageable size. This is especially valuable with respect to Vietnam, where foreign involvement has been so complex and of such duration that it is necessary to limit the scope of analysis. This definition also is a check against treating all foreign policy actions as interventionary, as can be done if a strictly common sense usage of "intervention" is applied.

Rosenau sees another advantage of his definition: It avoids equating intervention with colonialism or imperialism. These, he says, involve the continued presence of the intervening actor in the target

society, while interventions come to an end. It seems, however, that interventions can have colonialistic and imperialistic objectives, and that using this operational definition of intervention helps but little to draw a clear line between the phenomena.¹

As the American role in Vietnam grew and policies evolved, new practices often broke sharply with the past. Most were authority-oriented. Through use, they became conventional. In this respect, there was a series of "interventions" within the framework of a commonsensical intervention. It would be a mistake to ignore this commonsense meaning. Rosenau's contribution is to facilitate identification and analysis of crucial events and conditions within this larger context.

Using Rosenau's definition, American intervention can be dated from 1950, the year the so-called "Bao Dai solution" came to fruition. The French had been working for the establishment of a nationalist Vietnamese government under Prince Bao Dai. When this came about in 1950, Ho Chi Minh denounced the new government and the Kremlin in turn recognized Ho's government. This, in the opinion of then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson, revealed Ho "in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina." The United States recognized Bao Dai and soon provided aid. It was from then on deeply involved in Vietnam, firmly set on an anti-communist course.²

An anonymous Pentagon Papers author described the American backing of Bao Dai and the French in 1950 as a "remarkable volte-face."

¹James N. Rosenau, The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pp. 290-295.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, Section I, p. A8.

Earlier, there had been overtures toward Ho in the form of modest aid to the Viet Minh from the Office of Strategic Services. Just what the American attitude had been before 1950 is debated. Some believe President Franklin Roosevelt was ambivalent about Indochina, that he never made up his mind whether to support the French in reclaiming its colony after World War II. Others, notably Bernard Fell, felt FDR was determined to eliminate the French from Indochina at all costs; hence the U.S. flirtation with Ho and the unwillingness to help France before 1950.

U.S. policy toward Indochina had a low priority right after the war. European economic recovery and collective security in the face of a perceived communist threat were more important than Vietnamese nationalism. While U.S. leaders had reservations about reinstatement of a French colonial presence in Indochina after the war, they drifted along with France toward the Bao Dai solution.

Americans were put off by Ho's suspected communism, and they were cognizant of the views of Great Britain, which wanted the future of Indochina left in French hands. The interests of big-power cooperation in Europe prevailed.¹

Probably the chief policy-maker at the time was Dean Acheson, secretary of state from 1949 to 1953. He was most responsible for the early U.S. commitment to Vietnam. Yet he was a prisoner of European perceptions of communism and of "containment." Asia was of little interest to him; it was less important than Europe.

On a state visit to America in 1949, Prime Minister Jawaharlal

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, Section I, pp. A1-A4, A7.

Nehru of India warned Acheson that Bao Dai would not succeed as a leader because he lacked character, ability and prestige, and because the French would not give him enough authority. Nehru urged Acheson to regard Ho Chi Minh as an alternative, as a nationalist first and a communist second. Acheson was inclined to agree with Nehru about the weaknesses of Bao Dai, but he saw no alternative, and certainly not in Ho Chi Minh.

In India and Burma, communists had begun as the left wing of the nationalist movement, then attempted to take over the movement and failed. This, (Nehru) hoped, would be repeated in Indochina. To me this was a clearly specious idea, since, as the experience of both France and Italy showed, the attempt to take over would be inevitable and the outcome would depend on the strength of the other side. With the leadership of the nationalist movement already in Ho's hands, the outcome in Indochina would seem pretty clear.¹

The policy of containment, which was embraced even more heartily by the next secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, might have been appropriate for Europe, where the threat was primarily military, but it did not work in Asia, where the threat was political. Military containment is irrelevant where weak governments are targets for communism. Moreover, communism did not stay monolithic, if it ever had been; yet American policy-makers pursued a Vietnam policy blind to this reality.²

Thus the inauspicious beginning of American intervention in Vietnam: intervention based on a narrow view of communism and initiated in the context of "no real alternatives."

¹Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 335.

²Hans Morgenthau, "We Are Deluding Ourselves in Viet-Nam," The Viet-Nam Reader, eds., Bernard Fall and Marcus G. Raskin (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 38, 41.

The United States had intervened in an internal war, a war caused by grievances within a country and fought in the country. The contending forces were engaged in political violence. Incumbents and insurgents were using force in attempts to control political behavior and accomplish political objectives. Various kinds of force can be used in internal wars: retaliatory repression of governments, terrorism by extremists, assassinations, student riots, mass uprisings, coups d'etat, guerrilla warfare.¹

Internal wars can be classified according to their goals. Personnel wars, primarily coups, are over who fills existing roles in the government; policy does not change appreciably, just personalities. Authority wars are contests over how the roles are arranged in the structure of political authority; anti-colonialist struggles are in this category. Structural wars entail changes in substructures of a society, as, for example, the system of ownership or the educational system.

The war in Vietnam was a structural internal war; it involved a communist-nationalist faction intent on making major changes in the society. An agrarian revolt or a black-majority fight against white-supremacist rulers (in South Africa, for instance, where apartheid is at stake) could be labeled structural wars, too. Of course, these also would be personnel and authority wars. So a structural war is the most comprehensive type of internal war.

This type offers the greatest potential for change within a society. For this reason it makes other nations uneasy. They are more

¹James N. Rosenau, "Internal War as an International Event," International Aspects of Civil Strife, ed., James N. Rosenau (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 45.

likely to take notice and intervene in a structural war than in other kinds.¹

In fact, wide-ranging intervention has been a phenomenon of the post-World War II world. A study of interventions involving troops actively deployed inside a target country showed fifty-eight nations were the object of interventionary activity between 1948 and 1967. Of the fifty-eight target nations, forty-seven were in Asia, the Mideast or Africa. Of thirty-four intervening countries, twenty-seven were in these regions. The United States and Great Britain were the most frequent interveners.

Regional power balances or ideology, two elements of intervention in Vietnam, were the leading reasons for intervention. Thirty of fifty-eight large-power interventions had to do with regional balances, sixteen with ideology. Distant interventions were undertaken mostly by large powers and were friendly interventions, i.e., in support of existing governments.²

These statistics report only military interventions. When one remembers that interventions can be non-military as well, the extensiveness of the phenomenon is driven home. Indeed, defining intervention as an illegal military encroachment on a nation's sovereignty is outmoded now that many non-military modes exist. The aid-giving process

¹Rosenau, "Internal War as an International Event," pp. 63, 64, 66, 67.

²F.S. Pearson, "Geographic Proximity and Foreign Military Intervention," Journal of Conflict Resolution, XVIII (September, 1974), 443, 453.

can constitute intervention, as it did when the U.S. began helping the French in Indochina.¹

Many factors enter into decisions to intervene. (Intervention is being defined as convention-breaking behavior directed at authority structures.)

Under what conditions is a nation or an international organization likely to be ready to break with the prevailing mode of conduct and attempt to alter or preserve the structure of authority in another society? To what extent are developments within nations or international organizations likely to heighten their propensities to engage in such behavior? To what extent are differences among individual leaders, role-generated perceptions of bureaucracies, and the nature of constitutional restraints likely to contribute to interventionary propensities? To what extent are developments within the authority structure of a nation likely to attract convention-breaking behavior on the part of actors external to it? To what extent are the dynamics of intervention to be found . . . elsewhere in the international system? In short, what is the relative potency of individual, role, governmental, societal, and systemic variables with regard to intervention as a form of foreign or international policy?²

Policy-makers usually feel little or no public pressure to intervene in another nation's affairs. The public is passive toward foreign affairs. Moreover, interventions have elements of surprise and secrecy not associated with open public discussion. So the societal variable is unimportant.³ Also relatively insignificant is the governmental structure of an intervening nation. Nations with strong cabinet systems, weak cabinet systems, many or few parties intervene. So do totalitarian nations.⁴

¹David Baldwin, "Foreign Aid, Intervention, and Influence," World Politics, XXI (April, 1969), 425.

²Rosenau, The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy, p. 297.

³Rosenau, p. 298.

⁴Rosenau, p. 299.

Rather than the shape of government, the crucial factor is its leadership. Individual and bureaucratic role variables are potent sources of intervention.

It could well be argued that interventions are more exclusively a consequence of decision-making activity than any other type of foreign policy, that assessments of the need for and probable outcome of interventionary behavior are more subject to the whims of individual leaders and the dynamics of bureaucratic structures than the diplomatic, economic, military, and political policies through which nations conventionally relate themselves to the international system.¹

Finally, the makeup of the international system is important in decisions to intervene. The structure of the system, the extent to which the structure is sustained by ideological rivalry, and the stability of nations are systemic variables.²

The international political system is a loose bipolar system of two contending blocs, each with an interest in opposing or preventing internal changes in a country that might drive that country out of its bloc and into the opposing bloc. In short, each bloc wants change that hurts the other.³

Loose bipolarity developed mainly because communism did. Formation of a communist bloc led to a counter bloc, the so-called Free World or Western bloc. Before the rise of political movements, such as communism, that crossed national boundaries, a balance-of-power system obtained. Nation-states were the only significant actors; they sought to

¹Rosenau, p. 299.

²Rosenau, p. 300.

³Morton A. Kaplan, "Intervention in Internal War: Some Systemic Sources," International Aspects of Civil Strife, Rosenau, p. 106.

maintain the independence of other states to ensure a system of constantly shifting coalitions.¹

Under the balance-of-power system, a prevailing interest was in keeping internal wars--like the one in Vietnam--internal. Generally, this is not true with loose bipolarity; intervention is to be expected as power blocs vie for member-nations.²

However, according to the model of loose bipolarity, the power blocs have an interest in leaving some uncommitted states alone. Their function is to be mediators; they try to settle disputes, prevent small wars from spreading, etc. To the extent that uncommitted nations can enunciate apparently impartial criteria for resolving differences between blocs, they are invaluable peacekeepers.³

As for ideological rivalry in the international system, when it is intense decision-makers are inclined to regard possible governmental changes somewhere in the world as quite important.⁴ Internal wars perceived to be instigated by an external power have especially strong international repercussions. National leaders, recognizing that another national power or power bloc is attempting to expand its influence in a society by spreading chaos, are quick to consider their options, including intervention.⁵

Probably the most potent systemic variable is the stability of nations. The more unstable the authority structure of a foreign country, the more likely it is that it will be the object of an intervention

¹Kaplan, p. 112.

²Kaplan, p. 115.

³Kaplan, pp. 97, 98.

⁴Rosenau, The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy, p. 301.

⁵Rosenau, "Internal War as an International Event," p. 79.

by another nation. Governments are ever alert to unstable conditions abroad, ready to maintain order or exploit disorder.¹

So individual, role and systemic variables are critical when it comes to decisions on intervention. These variables will be discussed with respect to American intervention in Vietnam in the concluding chapter.

United States intervention involved a large, powerful nation acting in support of a small, weak nation against a third nation that also was small. The ensuing conflict was asymmetrical: a confrontation between seemingly unequal foes. In its nature and its outcome, the American experience in Vietnam fit the pattern evident in a number of post-World War II conflicts, a pattern which in fact was a break with the past.

In Algeria, Cyprus, Morocco, Tunisia and Indochina, local nationalist forces confronted industrial powers possessing strong armies --and "won." They gained political victories by resisting defeat until the political capabilities of their opponents to fight on were exhausted.

It was demonstrated in Vietnam that conventional military superiority, which clearly lay with the United States, was insufficient. The war was fought in Vietnam and in the political and social institutions of America, where disenchantment grew and blossomed into opposition. Eventually, the protracted warfare enunciated chiefly by Mao Tse-tung, the willingness to absorb the high costs of fighting a technologically strong adversary over an extended period of time, was successful.²

¹Rosenau, The Scientific Study, p. 301.

²Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," World Politics, XXVII (January, 1975), 176, 177.

American military aims were to control territory and "punish" the enemy into giving up. In adhering to this strategy, American leaders ignored, or failed to see, the nature of guerrilla warfare and of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong perseverance.

We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process, we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win. . . . In a guerrilla war, purely military considerations are not decisive; psychological and political factors loom at least as large.¹

Let us now look to the Pentagon Papers for a description of how the Americans lost by not winning.

¹Henry Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," Foreign Affairs, XLVII (January, 1969), 214, 215.

Chapter 2

VIETNAM POLICIES AND POLICY-MAKING

The Pentagon Papers consist of 3,000 pages of narrative history and more than 4,000 pages of appended documents (about 2.5 million words altogether) in forty-seven volumes. They took a year and a half to prepare. The period of history covered is from World War II to May, 1968, when peace talks began in Paris after President Johnson had limited further military commitments and announced his intention not to seek re-election.¹

The Papers describe what decisions were made, why they were made and by whom. It is a unique record, though a flawed one by virtue of restrictions placed on the authors and because of the affiliation of the authors. These shortcomings, however, will be discussed in a later chapter. This chapter will relate, with a minimum of analysis, the goals and policies detailed in the Pentagon study.

The Papers were written in this context: Once basic policy had been set, the internal debate among American decision-makers was on how to reach the goals, not on the goals themselves. The underlying belief was that communism had to be stopped to prevent its spread, domino-style, to other countries in the region. This premise for the American

¹Neil Sheehan and others, The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. ix.

intervention went virtually unchallenged throughout the debate, which lasted from about 1950 through at least 1967.¹

As has been said, a watershed decision was made in 1950, when the United States decided to support Bao Dai and the French against the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh.² The major catalyst behind this decision was the demise of the Kuomintang in China.³ China's fall to the communists ended what had been a period of great ambivalence for American policy-makers.

Roosevelt had been undecided, and Harry Truman aided neither the French nor Ho Chi Minh, though the latter sent a series of letters asking for U.S. help.⁴ American support of Ho would have required an acute perception of communism and nationalism which policy-makers did not possess. They had a blurred vision of national or independent communism. Backing Ho would have involved great risk for U.S. decision-makers, for they could not see Ho as an Asian counterpart to the relatively independent Tito of Yugoslavia. They were afraid of Vietnamese expansionism under Ho, so the path of prudence seemed advisable.⁵

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. xix.

²U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Hearing, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess., September 20, 1971 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), Book 1, Section I, p. A-15.

³Gabriel Kolko, "The American Goals in Vietnam," The Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel Edition, V, eds., Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 3.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, I, p. A-24.

⁵Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, I, p. C-7.

Non-intervention by the U.S. on the side of Ho was tantamount to the acceptance of the French and their "solution" for Vietnam.¹

Between 1950 and 1954, the United States provided military aid to French forces fighting the Viet Minh. The French asked for more help: for U.S. air strikes in disguised planes, for example. But President Eisenhower thought it would be a "tragic error" to intervene directly in Vietnam to help the French.² A "united action" approach by the United States, France and Great Britain had been suggested as a way of defeating the Viet Minh, but the British were cool to the idea and it was overtaken by events, specifically the fall of the French outpost, Dien Bien Phu, to the Viet Minh.³ This was, in effect, the end of the French Indochina War.

The fall of Dien Bien Phu prompted a reappraisal of the situation in Indochina. Whereas a year earlier the loss of Indochina to communism and a negotiated settlement of the conflict had been deemed a threat to the security of the U.S. and all of Southeast Asia, in 1954 American policy-makers revised their opinion. The loss of Vietnam no longer was seen as necessarily leading to communist control of all of Indochina.⁴ Nevertheless, the implied threat of American intervention was allowed to stand, and the U.S. role at the peace talks in Geneva was that of a passive observer firmly opposed to co-signing the peace treaty.⁵

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, I, p. A-2.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, Section II, p. B-30.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, II, p. B-20.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, II, p. B-30.

⁵Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, Section III, p. A-2.

The National Security Council, meeting August 8 and 12, 1954, decided the Geneva pact partitioning Vietnam was a disaster, a major step forward for the communists.¹ The NSC then decided to provide economic and military aid to Ngo Dinh Diem, who had replaced Bao Dai as the leader of the new South Vietnam. American decision-makers cast their lot with Diem despite U.S. intelligence reports that he was weak and unpopular among Vietnamese.²

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles saw no one else to support except Diem; he thought only Diem could lead South Vietnam. This was an issue over which the Americans and the French disagreed. The French objected to Diem, one official calling him "not only incapable but mad."³

Before Dulles's declaration of support for Diem, in 1955, Gen. J. Lawton Collins, the U.S. representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization military committee, had been sent to Saigon to help Diem's government. Among other things, Collins was to aid Diem in counteracting Viet Minh infiltration. Soon, however, Collins was urging that an alternative to Diem be found. He recommended returning to Bao Dai or reconsidering an earlier proposal to gradually withdraw from Vietnam. Later, though, Collins changed his mind and Dulles stood by Diem.⁴

American support of the South Vietnamese leader continued even after he ignored the provision of the Geneva pact that called for country-wide elections in 1956 to determine a government for Vietnam, North

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, III, p. D-14.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, Section IV, p. 26.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, IV, pp. 33, 35.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, IV, pp. 20, 21, 25.

and South.¹ Diem insisted he was not bound by the Geneva accords because he did not sign them; the French did. This was true despite the fact that technically South Vietnam was independent by the time of the peace conference. Diem did have grounds for repudiating the agreements.

Diem might have won the plebiscite, according to the Papers authors. This seems highly doubtful; earlier, President Eisenhower estimated that Ho Chi Minh would have won eighty percent of the vote. In any event, when Diem refused to hold the elections, neither Britain nor the Soviet Union, two signers of the peace agreement, pressed the matter.² For its part, the United States adopted the view that Hanoi would not have allowed free general elections anyhow and the International Control Commission, set up to administer the 1954 peace pact, could not have adequately supervised them.³

The rejection of the elections meant reunification could be achieved only by a resort to force. The policy of Diem, and American support of it, led to a test of strength with North Vietnam, which, the Papers say, was motivated by nationalism and expansionism.⁴

By the end of the 1950s, then, South Vietnam was the creation of the United States. Without the U.S. intervention, Diem would not have consolidated his hold on the country in 1955-56, he would not have been able to discuss the 1956 elections, and he would not have survived without American aid. And all the while, intelligence experts continued

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, IV, p. 40.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 1, IV, pp. 38, 40.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, Section IV, p. 7.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 12.

to assess Diem as weak and lacking support among his people.¹ (Why the intelligence reports failed to sway American decision-makers is not addressed in the Papers.)

The lack of support for Diem among Vietnamese is critical. U.S. intelligence reports concluded that the insurgency in South Vietnam began mainly as a rebellion against the oppressive Diem regime.² "The growth of apathy and considerable dissatisfaction among the rural populace" was a major cause of the insurgency.

There were three periods of insurgency: from 1954-56, when the situation was quiet and only the political struggle was going on; 1956-58, when dissident cadres in the South began to actively rebel,³ and 1959, when the Politburo in Hanoi decided to support aggression in the South.⁴

Diem alienated many elements in South Vietnam which might have offered him political support. He was egregiously incompetent in rural programs. His failure to carry out land reforms could have in itself caused a rebellion without help from North Vietnam.⁵ Diem promised farmers much and delivered little. The result was that he was deeply resented by the peasants.⁶ A structured rebellion against the Diem

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 24, 25.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 67.

³Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 72.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, Section IV, p. 24.

⁵Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 2.

⁶Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 14.

regime began in 1957 and '58. Most of the rebels were South Vietnamese; the causes they fought for had evolved in the South, not in Hanoi.¹

The official U.S. position was that North Vietnam had manipulated the entire struggle in South Vietnam. The case for this, according to the Pentagon Papers, is not wholly compelling. An alternative view might be that North Vietnam seized a chance to enter an ongoing internal war in 1959. The truth, according to the equivocal authors, is somewhere in between.²

There were some North Vietnamese communists in the South from 1954 to 1960, but they had not been directed to mount an insurgency. The period from 1956-59 was one of reorganizing and recruiting for the Communist Party. Moreover, there were no direct links between Hanoi and the rural terrorists in the South. It was only at the end of the decade that Hanoi's involvement became evident. Until then, the United States had not seen that Diem was in trouble, that he was in danger of being overthrown.³ American policy-makers had considered Diem a miracle-worker. Although they recognized his oppressive tendencies, they focused on his accomplishments and compared him favorably with other Asian rulers.⁴

American policy after 1954 was not directed toward altering the status quo, i.e., the fact of two Vietnams. It was conservative, with the emphasis on organizing collective security against communism.⁵

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 2.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 3.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 2.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 15.

⁵Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk. 2, IV, p. 4.

Dulles, in a cable to the American embassy in Saigon, said the United States should not act "to speed up present process of decay of Geneva accords" but not make "slightest effort to infuse life into them."¹ The accords were allowed by the South Vietnamese and Americans to decay. The settlement failed to provide a lasting peace because it was just a truce in an ongoing war.²

Though the war continued, few American officials were worried about it as the 1950s drew to a close. Intelligence estimates in the summer of 1959 were to the effect that the situation in Vietnam was unhappy but not unstable. This was the state of affairs when President John Kennedy took office in 1961. Kennedy dealt with Vietnam only occasionally during most of his first year as president.³

In April of 1961, Kennedy ordered 400 Special Forces troops and 100 more American advisers to South Vietnam. He thus signaled American willingness to go beyond the strictures of the Geneva accords, which limited military advisers to 685. If done openly, the move would have been the first formal breach of the accords; it was not done openly, however.⁴ Kennedy also ordered clandestine warfare by South Vietnamese agents against North Vietnam.⁵

Late in 1961, South Vietnamese president Diem asked for a bilateral defense treaty with the United States and for an American

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 3.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, p. 11.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, B1, pp. 1-3.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, B1, p. 30.

⁵Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 82.

military build-up. Diem was concerned about the growing power of the Viet Cong and about what the VC attacks were doing to confidence in his government. To investigate first hand, the president sent his personal military adviser, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, to Vietnam in October. In making the Taylor mission public, Kennedy was vague about its purpose. Nevertheless, the press reported that the general would study the need for American troops.

After making his assessment, Taylor proposed sending 6,000-8,000 American troops in the guise of a flood-relief contingent. He envisioned a massive South Vietnamese-American effort to combat flooding in the Mekong Delta--and to combat communists. The introduction of dedicated Americans, Taylor thought, could solve South Vietnam's problems.¹ Other officials were skeptical; Secretary of State Dean Rusk questioned the wisdom of investing so much in a "losing horse."²

Taylor's report was founded on two ideas: A firm, unambiguous military commitment would remove doubts about U.S. resolve to fight communism in Asia; the doubts had arisen because of the deteriorating Western position in neighboring Laos. Second, Diem's weaknesses--his poor administration and his army's lack of offensive spirit--could be overcome if enough Americans showed the Vietnamese how to win the war.³

There actually was little debate among the policy-makers on sending troops at this stage; there was even less public debate. Kennedy decided to send support units, not combat soldiers. He did not

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, B1, pp. 69, 85, 101.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 102.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, B1, p. 101.

embrace an unqualified commitment to save South Vietnam from the communists. Kennedy, however, did initiate an attempt to focus public and diplomatic activity on infiltration from North Vietnam.

Moreover, the president wanted to press Diem to make some reforms in his government. He urged Diem be told that U.S. willingness to offer more help to South Vietnam would depend on whether reforms were forthcoming, especially reforms that broadened Diem's political base. So Kennedy held out to Diem less than the South Vietnamese leader was expecting, and he sought internal changes Diem was unprepared to make.¹

One source of optimism among U.S. policy-makers was the strategic-hamlet program formally adopted by Diem in mid-March, 1962. The aim of the program was to regroup Vietnamese civilians into fortified hamlets where members of the Viet Cong could be weeded out and popular allegiance to the Diem government won through better security and improved services.²

It did not take long for the optimism to drain away. The program had difficulties from the start. For one thing, the American military, the U.S. civilian arm and the Diem government had different perspectives and ideas. The military wanted to clear out VC; the civilians stressed build-up of the South Vietnamese infrastructure; Diem wanted to use the program to control not only the communists but his own people.³ By mid-1963, the U.S. alternatives were to try to make Diem change the

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 2, IV, B1, pp. 136, 138.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 111.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B2, pp. iii.

program, allow him to run it his own way and hope for the best, or get rid of Diem.¹

American decision-makers pursued the first course, but, in the words of the Papers authors, the strategic-hamlet program "failed dismally." Diem and the Americans approached the problem differently, and Diem was in charge. He made the program country-wide rather than build it up slowly, as his advisers counseled. In addition, it was patterned after earlier resettlement plans of the French; these had failed because of resentment on the part of the people affected, the peasants. The U.S. had slighted the historical record of resistance to resettlement. The consequence was the failure of an important counterinsurgency effort, the failure of an important alternative to a purely military approach.²

Gradually, the realization dawned that an alternative to Diem had to be found. Friction between the South Vietnamese regime and the Americans grew as the U.S. intervention deepened. Diem resisted making the reforms urged on him by American advisers; he even complained of "colonialism" by the Americans. Diem was ever more dependent on his tyrannical brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. He was isolated from the populace and was rigid in his mandarin style of governing. These were elements of his eventual downfall.

In 1963 the choices facing U.S. policy-makers were to stick with Diem, encourage or tacitly support his overthrow, or disengage from South Vietnam. The first choice was rejected. The third was never considered because a non-communist South Vietnam was still deemed essential.

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B2, p. 35.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B2, p. iii.

The second option was chosen because the United States wanted to succeed in its intervention.¹

The end of U.S. support of Diem began with peace demonstrations by Vietnamese Buddhists in the summer of 1963. The Buddhists' protests had become a vehicle for mobilizing widespread popular resentment of the oppressive, arbitrary regime of Diem. American advisers tried to persuade Diem to redress some of the grievances, but Diem took a hard line. He did not understand that changes were needed in his country.²

On August 21, Diem's Special Forces raided Buddhist pagodas, wounding 30 monks and arresting 1,400. This "decided the issue for us."³ The raids were timed to catch the Americans off guard; there was no U.S. ambassador in Saigon at the time because the newly-named ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, had not yet arrived.⁴

"Beginning in August, 1963, we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government." The generals first contacted American representatives on August 23. The Central Intelligence Agency worked with the generals through Lt. Col. Lucien Conein, a veteran Vietnam hand since 1944.⁶

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, pp. 1, 2.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. ii.

³Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 166.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. iii.

⁵Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 162.

⁶Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 159.

On August 29, the National Security Council met and endorsed the view of Ambassador Lodge that there was no turning back, that Diem had to be removed from the scene. The initial plot against him proved premature, however, leaving more time for American policy-makers to consider the pros and cons. The CIA and the military supported Diem. They were led by Gen. Paul Harkins, the commander in Vietnam, who thought the U.S. was treating Diem shabbily. Members of the White House staff and officials in the U.S. mission in Saigon and in the State Department favored ousting Diem. One option--pulling out of the war--was not discussed during the month-long policy review.¹

Secretary of Defense McNamara and Taylor visited Saigon in late September. Upon their return, they recommended a suspension of U.S. economic aid to coerce Diem, but not his overthrow. The two officials thought the war could, for the most part, be won in 1964.

The aid suspension was interpreted by the rebellious generals as a U.S. go-ahead.² They again contacted Americans in Saigon. By this time, Lodge considered it unlikely that Diem would respond to U.S. pressure. He thought the coup should go forward. Harkins still disagreed. He wanted to give Diem more time to get rid of his brother, Nhu. The difference of opinion in Saigon left Washington policy-makers "anxious and doubtful." But the process was in motion, and on November 1 the coup occurred. Led by Gen. Duong Van Minh, it was "executed with skill and swiftness." The United States recognized the new government a week later.³

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. iv.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. vi.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. viii.

Kennedy knew and approved of Diem's overthrow, though he always feared failure and an appearance of complicity. He was shocked at the killings of the brothers, Diem and Nhu. Kennedy had had confidence in the generals' assurances that the two would be given safe conduct out of the country. Despite the unexpectedly bloody outcome, though, the main objective had been achieved.¹

The Pentagon Papers authors conclude that America's part in Diem's overthrow heightened U.S. responsibilities and its commitment to the now-leaderless Vietnam.² The U.S. deepened its involvement, yet there seemed to be no alternative. The unreserved commitment to a single leader made the American position weak and manipulable. American influence over Diem was limited; he could get away with murder--and did.³ Finally, a bold move was necessary to get free of his yoke. Ambassador Lodge was the key decision-maker.

Ultimately. . . it was Mr. Lodge--a supremely self-confident ambassador, a former Republican vice-presidential nominee with independent political power, firm in his view, jealous of his ambassadorial prerogatives, intent on asserting his full authority--who exerted critical influence on the government.⁴

President Kennedy was killed not long after Diem. He left President Johnson a legacy of crisis, political instability and military deterioration in South Vietnam. This, despite his considerable build-up of combat support and advisory missions during his abbreviated administration. Indeed, Kennedy's decision to increase the American

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 182, 188.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. viii.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, B5, p. iii.

⁴Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 163.

intervention with the addition of more support units was made "almost by default" because the focus early in his administration, in 1961, had been on ground combat units. Moreover, the policies of the Kennedy administration were flawed in that they depended on reforms by Diem, and the reforms were not made.¹

Lyndon Johnson quickly endorsed the policies Kennedy had followed in Vietnam. His first policy statement on the war was National Security Action Memorandum 273, in which Johnson explained the purpose of the American intervention as, "to assist the people and government of (South Vietnam) to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy."²

There was a feeling of optimism among U.S. policy-makers. There was hope that support of a new government in South Vietnam would allow that country to start winning the war. Hopes were dashed, however, when it was discovered that conditions in South Vietnam were worse than reports had led Washington decision-makers to believe. The situation looked even bleaker when a coup in January, 1964, laid bare the administrative chaos and political instability that constituted "government" in South Vietnam.³

Still, America was wholeheartedly committed, NSAM 273 also requested that plans be undertaken for covert operations by South Vietnamese against North Vietnam and in Laos. The Department of State was directed to make a case to justify such measures. State was to show

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 85, 113.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 232, 233.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, Cl, p. iii.

that the Viet Cong were controlled, sustained and supplied from Hanoi, by way of Laos and other places.¹

Covert operations, Operation 34A, were launched against North Vietnam on February 1, 1964. Johnson hoped that progressively greater pressure on Hanoi would force North Vietnam to call off the insurrection it was believed to be sponsoring in the South. Yet there were doubts from the start that the effort would achieve its objective of inducing Hanoi to cease and desist.² McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the intelligence community gave the 34A raids little chance of helping.³

South Vietnamese or "hired personnel" did the raiding, kidnapping and sabotaging. Laotian and Thai troops conducted bombing raids over Laos. A third pressure device was the presence of destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, but the raids were thought the most important tool for attacking the "source" of the trouble in South Vietnam.⁴

Thus did the focus of the war shift to the North, despite American intelligence reports that indigenous sources were behind the insurgency in South Vietnam. The administration thought attacks on the North, including bombing, could not help but have an effect on Hanoi. The basic assumption was that North Vietnam, faced with the prospect of losing its industrial base through direct attacks, would stop the war.

In retrospect, this view can be seen to have been a serious misreading of North Vietnam's determination to resist. Instead of bringing

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 233.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 3, IV, C2, pp. 1, 3.

³Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 240.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C2 (b.), p. 2.

North Vietnam to its knees, the American role in sponsoring covert operations and some bombing intensified the psychological commitment of the U.S. to its interventionary policy in behalf of South Vietnam. "A demand for more was stimulated and an expectation of more was aroused."¹

A political settlement at this point was not seriously considered; McNamara and Johnson felt it would mean a communist South Vietnam. Lodge wanted a carrot-and-stick approach: economic assistance coupled with bombing. Johnson wanted planning to go forward for an all-out military approach, but he hesitated to take real military action. He was considering the international and domestic political consequences of such a move; for this reason, the policy debate was strictly internal.²

For all Johnson's hesitancy, military planning had reached an advanced stage. By May 23, 1964, William Bundy, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, had prepared a 30-day scenario of escalation that included full-scale bombing of North Vietnam and concluded with negotiations that were tantamount to surrender by Hanoi. The scenario was not implemented as written, but some of its elements became part of later escalatory policies.

On June 1 and 2, American decision-makers met in Honolulu and discussed an air war. Lodge argued for bombing the North soon to "bolster morale and give the population in the South a feeling of unity." The policy-makers also stressed the need for obtaining a congressional

¹The Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel Edition, III (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 106.

Subsequent citations will be as follows: Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., volume and page number. This will apply only to volumes I-IV; volume V, though bearing the same title, consists of critical essays published later.

²Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., III, p. 107.

resolution of approval for wider U.S. action in Southeast Asia. Yet they ended the conference in general agreement that major actions should be put off for a time. As offshoots of the conference, however, Army readiness was increased and information was leaked to the press as part of a public relations campaign to make Americans accept bolder action in Southeast Asia.¹

Johnson administration policy-makers continued on the route toward a wider war. They continued without regard to a CIA analysis--done at the president's request--that challenged the domino theory that was the basis of U.S. intervention. By this point, the war was deemed less important for what it meant to South Vietnam than for what it meant to the prestige of the United States. The U.S. had so much at stake that pressing ahead seemed the only option.

On August 4, 1964, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the Maddox and Turner Joy, American destroyers patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin. Authors of the Papers find the motives for the attacks unclear but suggest that the North Vietnamese might have been trying to recover face after a July 30 incident in which the Maddox had damaged one torpedo boat and sank a second.

Reprisal raids by American bombers were ordered. Targets were selected from a list first prepared in May. At the same time, President Johnson sought congressional approval of expanded military activity against North Vietnam. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed on August 7, with only two opposing votes.²

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 249-252.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 254, 255, 260, 262, 267.

In a scant three days, the administration had implemented two features of the May 23 scenario: the prepositioning of air strike forces and congressional authority for wider military action. Johnson wanted to solidify public support for his over-all Vietnam policy with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution; to a very great extent he succeeded. The resolution was a virtual blank check. And the air raids took the U.S. another step up the ladder toward a more complex interventionary role; the raids constituted another sharp break with the past. They meant a deeper commitment and less flexibility.

The reprisal air strikes marked the crossing of an important threshold in the war, and it was accomplished with virtually no domestic criticism. . . the precedent for strikes against the North was thus established. . . .¹

The administration reached a general consensus in early September that air attacks probably would have to be launched on a sustained basis.² At a September 7 meeting of key decision-makers, the Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed a desire to provoke North Vietnam into acts that would be answered with an American bombing campaign. John T. McNaughton, head of the Pentagon's foreign affairs planning staff, agreed but wanted a gradual application of pressure, not an unrestrained attack against the North Vietnamese. The principal decision-makers, however, did not want provocative acts, at least not in the immediate future. CIA chief John McCone and Maxwell Taylor wanted to wait; so did McNamara. They still wanted to strengthen the South Vietnamese government first.³

¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., III, pp. 107, 109.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C2 (b.), p. 25.

³Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., III, p. 110.

Yet from then on--from September 7--there was no basic disagreement among most American policy-makers that military action against North Vietnam would be required. Tactical considerations merely prevented action right away: the upcoming American presidential election; shakiness of the South Vietnamese government; the need to maintain a delicate balance in Laos; the need to increase public and congressional support, and a fear that negotiations with North Vietnam might be brought on prematurely (before Hanoi was really hurting).¹

President Johnson still entertained doubts about bombing; he wanted top priority given to stabilizing South Vietnam's leadership. The intelligence experts had doubts, too, that bombing would be effective.² A gap had developed during the planning for a bombing campaign. It was between the drastic concessions expected from Hanoi and the modest American efforts policy-makers hoped would break Hanoi's will. North Vietnam's commitment to victory was underestimated and the effectiveness of U.S. pressure was overestimated. Policy-makers thought American pressure coupled with declarations of American resolve would make the North Vietnamese concede. Moreover, the slow-step air attacks were thought to be less repugnant to the U.S. public than an all-out approach.³

Another reason for the gap is advanced in the Papers: The U.S. had run out of alternatives; bombing was all that was left.⁴

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C2 (b.), p. vii.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 331, 333.

³Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., III, p. 112.

⁴Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 113.

At the end of 1964, the South Vietnamese political situation turned still more chaotic, raising fears in Washington that a "Vietnam solution" (a settlement that would install the communists) would come about. Officials such as William Bundy were afraid that a sell-out to the National Liberation Front was imminent. Bundy was concerned that, for one thing, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand would be jeopardized (the domino theory).¹

In a January 6, 1965, memo to Dean Rusk, Bundy suggested that the U.S. take strong action, including the commitment of ground troops in northern South Vietnam as well as air strikes against the North. Bundy and other policy-makers did not think any resultant negotiations would yield a really secure and independent South Vietnam, but that the American actions would demonstrate U.S. strength for Southeast Asia as a whole.²

The American military soon had another opportunity to show its air muscle. On February 6, 1965, the Viet Cong attacked a U.S. advisers' compound at Pleiku, killing nine Americans. In reprisal, forty-nine Navy jets attacked a barracks and staging area north of the 17th parallel. The air raids, named Flaming Dart, were intended to be directly linked with the "larger pattern of aggression" by North Vietnam. They were designed to signal a change in the ground rules in the South, too. The rules that had prevented direct U.S. counter-measures against North Vietnam had been broken.³ The raids "precipitated a rapidly moving

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C2 (c.), p. 76.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C2 (c), p. 77.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C3, pp. 23, 25.

sequence of events that transformed the character of the Vietnam war and the U.S. role in it."¹

The changed situation, in which the Americans could be seen to be more aggressive, created a public relations problem for President Johnson, who had made much publicly of the home-grown nature of the war in South Vietnam. Public statements stressed the tit-for-tat involved in the air strikes, and policy-makers sought to focus public attention on North Vietnamese aggression. Among themselves, however, American officials had little expectation that North Vietnam would buckle. They fully expected that the U.S. would go beyond reprisal raids.

They were right. Operation Rolling Thunder, sustained bombing of North Vietnam, was approved on February 13, 1965. Air assaults began on a regular basis on March 2, when Americans and South Vietnamese aircraft attacked an ammunition depot in North Vietnam.² So bombing was under way. There were reasons for the new policy, but the decision was made as much because of a lack of other options as because of logic in favor of it.³

Air attacks seemed to strengthen the North Vietnamese in their willingness to keep fighting. As a consequence, decision-makers faced more hard choices: ease up on the bombing and other military action or commit ground troops. A third option, stepped-up bombing, was ruled out

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 343.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C3, pp. 25, 27, 52, 64.

³Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 344.

because of a fear that the People's Republic of China would intervene in behalf of North Vietnam.¹

President Johnson decided to commit ground troops. The decision was embodied in NSAM 328 of early April. Even before then, on March 8, U.S. Marines had come ashore at Danang to be a security force. They were supposed to free elements of the South Vietnamese army for other, more aggressive duty; to send a signal to Hanoi, and to bolster the morale of the South Vietnamese government. General Westmoreland regarded the Marine contingent as an important first step in a general military build-up.² Indeed, NSAM 328 changed the Marines' mission from defense to offense.³

NSAM 328 was an important document. It meant Johnson accepted the concept that American troops would take part in offensive operations, though the president still was not free of all doubts. (The degree of Johnson's anxiety is illustrated by the fact that the memo was kept secret until June 8, when it was disclosed by accident in a State Department news release.)

It is pretty clear, then, that the president intended, after the early April NSC meetings, to cautiously and carefully experiment with the U.S. forces in offensive roles. There was sober awareness that the North Vietnamese were not going to quit and that the U.S. was well on its way to being committed on the ground. The Rolling Thunder program, if it was going to bear fruit at all, certainly was not going to do so in the next few months.

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C5, p. 4.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C4, p. 1.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C5, p. 6.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C5, pp. 59, 60.

Begun for political and psychological considerations, the bombing became simply an ongoing military operation. It became conventional, to use the term in the context of Rosenau's discussion of intervention. The air war had been based on a serious misjudgment about its effect on Hanoi's will and capabilities. It had not worked as an exercise in strategic persuasion; North Vietnam was a poor target because it was not industrialized enough for air raids to be decisive. Bombing still was valued by American decision-makers, but it took second place to ground action in the summer of 1965.

The key figures in the 1965 build-up were Westmoreland and Johnson. Westmoreland wanted more troops and a deeper military commitment; Johnson was inclined to satisfy the general. By the end of 1965 the emphasis had changed; American troops in the South numbered 184,314. They were intent on winning, not just denying their opponents the victory.¹

Also by the end of the year, the American military's tactics on the ground had changed. At first, troops were kept in enclaves near bases, with their backs to the sea. The strategy was controversial; expectations for it ran the gamut. Taylor approved of it, hoping it would buy time for the Vietnamese army. Westmoreland thought it would mean defeat.² Westmoreland's view prevailed, as search-and-destroy replaced static defense. The first big battle involving American troops took

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 415-417, 459, 468, 469.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 4, IV, C5, p. 6.

place in mid-November, 1965, in the Ia Drang Valley. About 200 Americans were killed.¹

Even before the end of 1965, the secretary of defense, McNamara, had doubts about the efficacy of the U.S. policy in Vietnam. He asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a study on the "winnability" of the war. George Ball, an undersecretary of state, thought the United States should cut its losses.² John McNaughton, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, had doubts about many aspects of American policy, especially the air war. In a memo to the Joint Chiefs, McNaughton outlined a concept of winning that many would come to embrace; that is, that winning meant succeeding "in demonstrating to the VC that they cannot win."

That kind of victory was what the Joint Chiefs suggested was possible in answer to McNamara. The assessment, in July, 1965, was that "within the bounds of reasonable assumptions. . . there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will--and if that will is manifested in strategy and tactical operations."⁴

McNamara was not fully reassured. Nevertheless, after making a trip to Saigon, the secretary of defense recommended sending more troops, increasing the authorization to 400,000 by the end of 1966, with the possibility that 200,000 more would be needed in 1967. The secretary acted

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 465.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 474.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (a.), p. 5.

⁴Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (a.), p. 1.

contrary to his own judgment that the deployments would not ensure success.

. . . . Even with the recommended deployments, we will be faced in early 1967 with a military standoff at a much higher level, with pacification still stalled, and with any prospect of military success marred by the chance of an active Chinese intervention.¹

Similarly, McNamara became disenchanted with the air war. In March, 1966, he went along with a Joint Chiefs proposal to bomb POL facilities in North Vietnam following a 37-day bombing pause. Air strikes against the proposed targets began in June, but did not have a significant impact on North Vietnam's petroleum supplies.²

By late 1966, however, McNamara favored a leveling-off of the air bombardment. He had been influenced by the conclusions of forty-seven scholars who studied America's Vietnam policy during the summer. They reported that the bombing had had no effect on North Vietnamese efforts in South Vietnam. North Vietnam was too agricultural, its transportation system too flexible to be hurt fatally by American bombing.³

Along with stabilizing the air war, McNamara liked another proposal of the group of scholars: installation of an electronic barrier across the Demilitarized Zone. He approved of the new approach because infusions of more troops were unlikely to work when they hadn't in the past. Also, a big deployment would cause inflation in South Vietnam, and repeated escalations would not be acceptable to the U.S. public or convince Hanoi of American constancy. The secretary of defense thought

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (a.), p. 25.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 480.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (a.), pp. 90, 91.

the emphasis should be on building friendly forces only to a level sufficient to neutralize large enemy units so as to prevent their interfering with the pacification program.

Pacification had been generating new interest in the summer of 1966. The program of providing security for civilians and of winning their allegiance to the South Vietnamese government had not been keeping pace. Ambassador Lodge and Westmoreland wanted it increased. "Nation-building" had a new place on the priority lists of U.S. policy-makers. The new interest was short-lived, though, as a lull in combat ended and American attention again turned to military operations.¹ In any case, the pacification program was, inappropriately enough, an American program. Vietnamese officials played a secondary role; therein lay one of its major problems.²

McNamara's new thinking was reflected in an October 14 memo, in which he recommended installing the electronic barrier, stabilizing the air war and limiting increases in U.S. forces in 1967 to 470,000 men. The Joint Chiefs objected. They wanted strong action against North Vietnam, not a slowdown. The memo said "no" to the military for the first time. The judgment of the military leaders would no longer go unquestioned. An important precedent had been set. As a quick, cheap victory came to be seen as the illusion it was, the reality of Vietnam as a quagmire took hold. Military leaders became more isolated.³

Thus from 1966 on, there were essentially three camps: 1) the

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (a.), pp. 109, 110, 56, 57, 62.

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 6, IV, C8, p. i.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (a.), pp. 93, 125, 126.

McNamara group of disillusioned doves who tried to set limits and reduce the war; 2) the military--the Joint Chiefs and Westmoreland--who wanted a wider war, and 3) President Johnson and the State Department, who sought some middle ground.¹

During the first part of 1967, the air war was the main point of controversy. McNamara and McNaughton wanted to de-escalate; the military wanted a step-up. In the middle were William Bundy of the State Department, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown, and President Johnson.²

For the president, a turning point came after the seven-day truce in honor of the Tet holiday in February. A peace mission by Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Great Britain and Premier Alexei Kosygin of the Soviet Union failed. In addition, Hanoi used the truce period to resupply its troops. Johnson approved more bombing targets on February 13. He stayed with the air war despite considerable opposition within the administration and despite intelligence estimates that it did little good.³

Another catalyst for debate was a new request for more troops from Westmoreland; he wanted 200,000. The Joint Chiefs urged mobilization of reserves as well, plus incursions in Laos, Cambodia and perhaps North Vietnam, and the mining of North Vietnamese ports. In short, they wanted a solid commitment to victory. But the president wondered if the

¹Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 511

²Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 6, IV, C7 (b.), p. 1.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 6, IV, C7 (b.), pp. 7, 8.

North Vietnamese would just add more divisions, and he still wanted a greater effort from South Vietnamese forces.¹

The split between the military and civilian leaders came down to two options: 1) give Westmoreland the 200,000 troops and so widen the war, or 2) give troops but not so many as to require a reserve call-up, and suspend bombing in the North.

The debate continued throughout 1967. McNaughton urged a cut-back in bombing. He warned that the American public was uneasy, that it perceived a governmental establishment "out of its mind" with respect to Vietnam. McNamara became ever more pessimistic. The Joint Chiefs played down his pessimism and the president put distance between himself and his secretary of defense. Johnson heeded McNamara on troop levels but not on bombing targets.²

The critical turning point for U.S. policy in Vietnam came in 1968, after the Tet Offensive. The offensive, which began on January 31, took the administration by surprise. Its strength and intensity heightened the jolt felt in Washington. Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, hurried off to Saigon. He came back with the predictable news that Westmoreland needed more soldiers, 206,000 by year's end. This would have required a reserve call-up.

A fork in the road had been reached. Now the alternatives stood out in stark reality: To accept and meet General Wheeler's request for troops would mean a total U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam--an Americanization of the war, a call-up of reserve forces, vastly increased expenditures. To deny the request for troops, or to attempt to again cut it to a size which could be sustained by the thinly stretched active

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (b.), pp. 73-77, 84, 85.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., pp. 530-540.

forces, would just as surely signify that an upper limit to the U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam had been reached.¹

By this time Clark Clifford had replaced McNamara as secretary of defense. So when Johnson ordered a senior group of advisers to review U.S. policy in Vietnam, the group became known as the Clifford Group. Paul Warnke, head of the Pentagon's political-military policy office, and his associates, Morton Halperin and Richard Steadman, were dominant voices. They were among the administration's leading dissidents.²

The Clifford Group reassessment indicated that no ground strategy and no level of additional U.S. forces alone could bring about an early end of the war. Moreover, the group concluded that more escalation of the American involvement could touch off a domestic crisis in the United States. The study group recommended a policy of buying time for the South Vietnamese, enabling them to make their political and military leadership effective.³

General Wheeler was appalled. He quickly spotted two "flaws" in the Clifford Group recommendations: They would mean fighting in or close to population centers, and they would permit enemy troops to mass near population centers, especially north of Saigon.

The initial Clifford Group report, therefore, was revised and sent to the president on March 4. The recommendations from the secretary of defense were a compromise between civilians in the Pentagon who

¹Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (c.), pp. 2, 15, 16.

²Pentagon Papers, Times ed., p. 598.

³Pentagon Papers, GPO ed., Bk 5, IV, C6 (c.), p. 42.

wanted no troop increase and the Joint Chiefs, who wanted to regain the initiative. A deployment of 22,000 troops was suggested. The Clifford Group did not take advantage of the chance to turn U.S. policy around.¹

Meanwhile, public pressure against Johnson was growing. Dean Rusk was grilled by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the committee chairman, Senator J. William Fulbright, warned against all-out war. Eugene McCarthy did well in the New Hampshire primary; his showing was correctly interpreted as a sign of deep public discontent with American policy in Vietnam. News leaks on troop levels and Robert Kennedy's entry into the presidential race demoralized Johnson further.²

On March 22, 1968, Johnson announced that Westmoreland would be recalled and made chief of staff of the Army. This was a signal that the president had decided against major escalation of the ground war. Decisive advice came to Johnson on March 25 and 26. It was from an informal advisory group consisting of past policy-makers (Dean Acheson, Gen. Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor, and others). Most had been hawks, but now they felt bombing and sending more troops would do no good. Their assessment "greatly surprised" the president.³

Johnson's decision to seek a new strategy was made public March 31. He announced a partial bombing halt and only a token troop increase. None of the 200,000 troops Westmoreland had asked for in February were to be sent. The biggest news was that the president would not seek re-election.

¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., IV, pp. 568, 575, 583-585.

²Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., IV, p. 589.

³Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., IV, pp. 592, 593.

Johnson faced the reality that more of the same would not help the situation in Vietnam, and that it would further divide Americans at home. Americans had gone to Vietnam to help the South Vietnamese, but they had gradually assumed the burden themselves. The political objectives seemed attainable with military means. This belief went unquestioned for a long time as civilian policy-makers relied on military commanders to tell them what progress was being made. The Tet Offensive showed how little progress had been made. Suddenly the political, economic and social costs of fighting a no-win war had become too great.¹

¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel ed., IV, pp. 602-604.

Chapter 3

BERNARD FALL ON U.S. POLICY IN VIETNAM

Bernard Fall believed Western policy toward Vietnam was an accumulation of many subtle moves and small decisions, none decisive in itself and all seemingly unavoidable at the time. For a while, the impact of certain actions was reversible; some options remained. Gradually, however, choices became fewer and their results more consequential.

Policy partners become 'allies,' opponents become 'enemies'-- and the hitherto inconsequential options become 'solemn commitments' whose bond has to be underwritten with the blood of one's citizens and the total resources of one's economy. And there is an understandable tendency, once the conflict has become overt, to validate retroactively all policy decisions that led to this situation.¹

In Fall's opinion, Western policy-makers erred early with respect to Indochina in general and to Vietnam in particular. Subsequent policy was built upon the initial errors, so that, in the words of historian Arthur Schlesinger, "error create(d) its own reality." American policy toward Vietnam during the 1950s and '60s was developed to comport with an error-created reality. Decisions were based on the misinterpretation of facts or on the deliberate dismissal as irrelevant of important facts.²

Fall was extremely critical of Diem and of United States support of him. That support illustrated the inclination of American policy-makers to turn a blind eye to certain conditions that conflicted with

¹Bernard Fall, Viet-Nam Witness (New York: Praeger, 1966), p.4.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 3.

their beliefs. Diem was hailed as an emerging Southeast Asian democrat on the verge of bringing his country into the mainstream of nations. If his regime had failings, they were attributed to his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and to Madame Nhu. Yet this official picture ignored the facts that South Vietnam was a dictatorship at the village level, the heart of the society, and that Diem had almost been upset twice before the successful coup in 1963.¹

Another error, Fall thought, was one of omission. It was the failure of the United States to support France in Indochina during the 1940s, with the result that the postwar fate of Vietnam was influenced in no small measure by the U.S. even before 1950, when American policy-makers decided to back France against the Viet Minh. The U.S. weakened France's postwar position in the Far East.²

During the war, as the French were trying to hold off the Japanese, they asked for American aid. It was refused. The State Department thought Japan was bluffing. French field commanders finally had to give in to the superior Japanese force.³ When some Frenchmen mounted a rebellion against the Japanese, President Roosevelt did not permit American military planes to help.⁴

United States policy was based on FDR's belief that the French had misruled Indochina. Fall thought that FDR had a fixation about French Indochina, that he gave it undue attention, and that his

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 5.

²Bernard Fall, The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 40.

³Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 41.

⁴Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 57.

decisions affecting it were divorced from reality. FDR proposed a trusteeship (China, Britain and the U.S.) for Indochina after the war to prevent the French from resuming control. Churchill, however, who was less anti-French, vetoed the idea.¹

History might be far different, Fall suggested, if the United States had acted with more foresight. For example, American pressure on French colonialists and on Ho Chi Minh to keep Ho's Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam (recognized by the French in 1946) in power could have been helpful. It might have led to Ho's becoming an Asian Tito, or he might have revealed his "aggressiveness" earlier and thus become the object of a unified American-French anti-communist effort. If this opportunity had not been missed, the French-fought colonial war from 1946-54 could have been avoided.

But, with the inevitability of a classical Greek tragedy, policy-makers in Saigon, Paris, and Washington (Hanoi was to join the list somewhat later) usually picked the course least likely to produce tangible long-range results, but the one closest to the path of least resistance at the time.²

U.S. support of Ho Chi Minh would not have been wholly inconsistent with past practice. The American OSS (Office of Strategic Services) helped him in 1944-45, and when the Viet Minh came to power it seemed for a time that the U.S. was backing him. But then the Americans pulled back.

Ho was intelligent, a resourceful pragmatist who was a Vietnamese first, a communist second.³ His energy and organizing ability, and that of a few other top communist leaders, enabled them to set up a "people's

¹Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 52.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 7, 8.

³Fall, Two Viet-Nams, pp. 100-103.

democracy" while their country was occupied by Chinese Nationalists, British and French military forces and U.S. observers. This accomplishment, under the very noses of Westerners, was indicative not only of Ho's ability but also of the confusion and lack of understanding that clouded the Western perception of Vietnam at the time.¹

In this context, it is not surprising that American policy-makers could do a virtual about-face in 1950 and begin aiding the French, abandoning Ho Chi Minh, the bogey of communism.

Three things propelled American policy-makers toward a rigidly anti-communist policy in Vietnam: the fall of China to Mao Tse-tung's forces; the advent of Senator Joe McCarthy, who saw "Red" everywhere; and the outbreak of the Korean War. Suddenly, Americans saw things differently. Bao Dai, the Vietnamese emperor whom the Japanese had installed and whom the French later supported, gained respectability as something more than a puppet. Ho Chi Minh, in policy-makers' eyes, lost whatever nationalistic coloration he had; he was a communist, pure and simple. And the cause of the French in Vietnam was perceived as worth the investment of American money and equipment because it represented a fight against communism.²

American supplies began flowing to the French: \$1.1 billion worth by the time hostilities ended July 21, 1954. The cost to the French for eight years of war was \$10 billion; 172,000 Frenchmen were dead or missing.³ The rationale for contributing American money and

¹Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 66.

²David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1973), pp. 149, 150.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 39.

materiel to what became a lost cause is articulated in this sentence from a speech by President Eisenhower on November 12, 1953: "The loss of Indochina will cause the fall of Southeast Asia like a set of dominoes." This was the fundamental principle of American intervention in Vietnam.¹

Fall concerned himself with military tactics as well as the making of abstract policy. It would have been instructive had later American leaders taken to heart what he said of the French military experience in Vietnam. Many French mistakes were repeated by the Americans.

A major French military leader was Gen. Henri Navarre, who took control of French Union Forces in the Far East in the spring of 1953. He brought the promise of more American aid and fresh French troops. He also brought the Navarre Plan, which was intended to make French forces more mobile and aggressive.

Navarre sent troops to seek out the Viet Minh in the mountain uplands. He dropped parachute battalions into the valley of Dien Bien Phu in an effort to get North Vietnamese General Giap to commit his best army divisions. But French intelligence underestimated the strength of Giap's army; 40,000 communist soldiers were concentrated around Dien Bien Phu. They were too much for the French. The ensuing siege and Vietnamese victory were decisive to the outcome of the French Indochina War.²

Navarre employed the concept of troop mobility, but not well. He dispersed his soldiers too widely. This, Fall maintained, was the

¹Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 225.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 30, 31, 34, 35, 38.

major lesson to be drawn from French tactics in the last year of the war. Another lesson was that air superiority involving underdeveloped areas was of limited usefulness. The French air force had little impact on the Viet Minh.¹ The use of air power and the dispersion of troops on search-and-destroy missions were mainstays of American military involvement in Vietnam. Neither approach was very effective.

Writing in 1956, Fall quoted L. M. Chassin, a commander of the French Far Eastern Air Force:

The West. . . risks becoming technologically incapable of dealing with an enemy whose ground troops advance single file on jungle paths, supplied from depots and arms factories in mountain caves.²

The description of the "enemy" might have come from a news report in the mid-1960s.

Earlier in 1954, before the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu effectively ended the French Indochina War, Fall had suggested that negotiations offered a better solution. His objective was to keep Vietnam whole, and he thought economic aid from the West might make this possible. A split would deprive both the North and the South of raw materials from the other.³ But the aid program was not to be. The country was divided by the Geneva agreement, signed on July 21, 1954.

The Geneva pact provided for a temporary division of Vietnam, but this was not the first choice of either side of negotiators. The Saigon delegation wanted territorial unity and national elections under the supervision of the United Nations. The Viet Minh at first wanted nationwide elections, too, but agreed with Chou En-lai of the People's

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 39 ²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 40.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 19-21.

Republic of China to accept "temporary regroupment areas." Chou and Premier Mendez-France did the actual negotiating at Geneva. The delegates from Britain and the Soviet Union acted as go-betweens.¹

The United States had for all practical purposes withdrawn from the peace conference. Secretary of State Dulles left Geneva in May, even before the conference began; the U.S. became an observer. Archly anti-communist America did not want to give the impression of approving a surrender to communism, as some no doubt interpreted the results of the Geneva conference. Instead, the U.S. submitted a separate declaration vowing to "refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb" the agreements reached in Geneva.²

Fall was critical of the U.S. refusal to accept a full measure of participation in the Geneva negotiations. By its action, the U.S. lost the chance to shape the terms of the settlement and to use its power to implement the pact. The American course was an abdication of responsibility, in Fall's opinion.³

As for the Vietnamese nationalists, they faced "the contempt of their enemies and the indifference of their allies." The French bypassed nationalist delegates and dealt with the Viet Minh directly. Diem's foreign minister, Tran Van Do, declared his mission a failure and resigned. He had fought unsuccessfully against partition and then for a neutral zone in the Catholic area of North Vietnam.

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 61, 71.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 74.

³Bernard Fall, "Our Options in Vietnam," The Reporter, March 12, 1964, p. 19.

⁴Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 62.

Fall thought the Geneva agreement a diplomatic success in view of the difficult circumstances.¹ But it did not take long for the agreement to come apart and for its flaws to become evident. The document was signed not by the South Vietnamese but by the French. It was essentially a military pact, and the South Vietnamese army was under French control in 1954.

This being the case, Diem declared the document not binding when it came time for the all-Vietnam plebiscite in July, 1956. The North had more people than the South, so the vote on the future of the country probably would have gone against Diem. Diem also spurned North Vietnamese overtures to normalize trade relations.

Shortly thereafter, North Vietnamese who had remained in South Vietnam after the mass movement of people between the two new countries--stay-behinds, Fall called them--began a terrorism campaign that led to the Second Indochina War. One of the failures of the Geneva agreement was the inability of the International Control Commission, set up to administer the peace, to do anything about the guerrilla activity.²

Why the insurgency in the South? Fall considered its causes both internal and external. North Vietnam took advantage of the unrest in the South brought on by failure of the Diem government to confront the country's problems. Fall described the conditions that prevailed in 1957:

The Diem regime was riding into the trough of a popularity wave whose crest may well have been the proclamation of the first republican constitution in October, 1956; . . . a

¹Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 231.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 77, 78, 81.

catastrophically slow land reform and a lagging economic tempo were alienating the vast mass of landless peasants and unemployed or underemployed nonagricultural laborers; and. . . poverty-stricken but militarily powerful North Viet-Nam could not possibly fail to take advantage of these glaring vulnerabilities, so thoughtlessly offered to it.¹

An important additional fact must have motivated North Vietnam to support malcontents in the South, according to Fall: U.S. advisers to Diem were so blind to the real weaknesses of South Vietnam under the dictator that a rebellion might succeed before the Americans caught on.² Optimism rather than close scrutiny of the situation became the rule for the Americans: "Unlimited optimism not only became part of official policy with regard to events in Viet-Nam--it was policy as such."³

American policy-makers underestimated the threat posed by the "stay-behinds" and did not see the flaws in the South Vietnamese government. The policy-makers, Fall contended, had the "naive belief" that 1) most Viet Minh were not communists but anti-French nationalists; 2) that Diem, an anti-French nationalist, would win them over; 3) that the Viet Minh would therefore collapse. Operating under these misapprehensions, the U.S. failed to treat the "last remnants" of the Viet Minh as anything more malignant than a dying force; no serious effort was mounted to defeat them. American military leaders regarded internal-security problems they caused as a police problem. They saw their own job as that of training the South Vietnamese to counter a Korea-style onslaught.

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 10.

²Bernard Fall, "Viet Cong--the Unseen Enemy in Viet-Nam," The Viet-Nam Reader, eds., Bernard Fall and Marcus G. Raskin (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 256.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 9.

Meanwhile, the insurgents took control of the rural areas. They terrorized the populace. In 1958-59, terrorism was such that local South Vietnamese officials were being killed at the rate of ten a day. Still the Americans did not discern the character of the hostile forces at work.¹

By February 9, 1962, however, when the Military Assistance Command was set up in Vietnam, the "last remnant" theory had been demolished by the sheer size of the insurgency. An inspection trip by Gen. Maxwell Taylor in October, 1961, had lifted the veil from before policy-makers' eyes. The spread of revolutionary warfare in South Vietnam finally was recognized and the invasion theory was born.

Fall contended that, although there were some aggressors from the outside, these could not account for the extent or persistency of the insurgency. A significant number of the insurgents were home-grown--nurtured on the injustices of the Diem government. But because American policy-makers did not see or acknowledge this, they had to pay the price of an extensive military involvement.²

Even without North Vietnamese action, then, South Vietnam would have been vulnerable because of the atomization of the society under Diem.³ Diem was a monarchist, an elitist, fiercely Catholic. He would not compromise. He considered all opposition subversive. Stubborn courage and family solidarity were his chief traits. Diem exacted dictatorial powers from Bao Dai when he acceded to the emperor's request,

¹Fall, Two Viet-Nams, pp. 324, 325, 328.

²Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 330.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 137.

in June, 1954, to become premier, and he guarded his powers jealously ever after.

Superficial governmental reforms were enacted, but the real result was more controls and less freedom for the average South Vietnamese.¹ In 1956, Diem abolished elected village councils and mayors, effectively bringing the dictatorship to the peasantry and ensuring the loss of any remaining support at the lowest level. In 1957, Diem went after the former members of the Viet Minh.²

Fall complained of Diem's arbitrary and undemocratic exercise of executive authority. (Fall was dismayed at how uncritical American scholars and government officials were of this authoritarianism and of Diem in general.) He believed the major problem with the Diem regime was that it had no contact with the grassroots. He thought Diem was doomed because he had lost touch with his people.³

Diem discriminated in favor of Catholics, causing widespread religious tensions. He abused the Montagnards, the mountain dwellers, by trying to force their assimilation into Vietnamese society. Because of their strategic location in the Central Highlands, the Montagnards' cooperation would have been necessary for South Vietnamese victory.⁴ Diem forcibly quelled organized resistance from three sects, the Cao-Dai, Hoa-Hao and Binh-Xuyen, instead of granting their request to broaden his government.

¹Fall, Two Viet-Nams, pp. 237, 244, 270.

²Fall, "Viet Cong--the Unseen Enemy," p. 256.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 286.

⁴Bernard Fall, "Viet-Nam--The Agonizing Reappraisal," The Viet-Nam Reader, Fall and Raskin, pp. 331, 332.

⁵Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 156.

Diem played groups off against one another: refugees against indigenous South Vietnamese; Montagnards against lowlanders; Buddhists against Catholics; pro-French against pro-American Vietnamese; the army against the civilians; peasants against city dwellers.¹ All of which gave credence to the assessment of North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong in 1962:

Monsieur Diem's position is quite difficult. He is unpopular, and the more unpopular he is the more American aid he will require to stay in power. And the more American aid he receives, the more he will look like a puppet of the Americans and the less likely he is to win popular support for his side.²

Diem did get more American help. He did not gain popular support among his people; indeed, American policy-makers never attached as much importance to Diem's need for support as Fall did. Until late 1963, the Americans accepted Diem on almost any terms. Whether South Vietnamese citizens felt an allegiance toward him or had confidence in his leadership was, for all practical purposes, irrelevant.

President Kennedy increased military aid and gave U.S. soldiers ever more latitude to go on the offensive in South Vietnam. American policy, though, lacked a grand design. It was an improvisation based on the assumption that all would be well once the last Viet Minh had been killed and the last Vietnamese farmer relocated in a "strategic hamlet."³

The strategic hamlet program, begun in 1962, was supposed to counteract the insurgency. It consisted of rounding up South Vietnamese peasants and putting them in hamlets where they were, in theory at least,

¹Fall, "The Agonizing Reappraisal," p. 332.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 112.

³Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 333.

beyond the influence of the guerrillas. The counter-guerrilla effort was patterned after Britain's successful program in Malaya. Yet the situation in Vietnam differed from what it had been in Malaya. The economic, social, political and military conditions that enabled the program to succeed in Malaya did not exist in Vietnam.

The terrorists in Malaya, part of the Chinese minority, were identifiable; in Vietnam the antagonists were all Vietnamese. Food could be denied the guerrillas in Malaya; not so in Vietnam, where it was available virtually everywhere. There was no sanctuary available in Malaya as there was in Vietnam (Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam). Communist indoctrination of the populace was much more advanced in Vietnam than in Malaya. Finally, the Vietnamese guerrillas were better armed than their counterparts in Malaya.

Thus Fall saw little to inspire hope in the strategic hamlet program--or, for that matter, in the other components of the early-1960s build-up: more weapons, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, chemical warfare compounds and more American advisers. Believing in counter-insurgency as a cure-all was wishful thinking, in Fall's view.¹

"Revolutionary warfare" was the term Fall preferred to counter-insurgency, not that he thought the U.S. or South Vietnam was successfully waging it. Revolutionary warfare connoted a political factor missing from the American intervention in Vietnam. In 1962 Fall wrote that "the communist challenge in Southeast Asia has yet to be faced on

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 271-273.

its real terrain: that of ideas, policies and down-to-earth effective administration."¹

A political and spiritual void in South Vietnam was a major weakness of the American-South Vietnamese position, Fall believed. South Vietnamese did not have confidence in their fight because they could not see promise of better times in it. And American policy-makers did little to bring about the political and social reforms that could have brightened their prospects.²

The Americans did what was easiest: concentrate almost exclusively on the military side of the war. The North Vietnamese and the Southern insurgents recognized the contest as a political one. The communists knew that the central objective of a revolutionary war is to win the allegiance of human beings. American policy-makers stressed the protection of power groups and the control of communications lines, land areas, military installations and the like. The people were abused. U.S. policy was to focus on the external military symptoms of the revolutionary war. This, Fall thought, "simply has no bearing on the preponderant politico-socio-economic components" of the conflict.

Moreover, the military tactics the U.S. employed were inappropriate. The classic hunt-and-kill operation, the approach used most, brought results as frustrating to the Americans as they had been to the French earlier. The French and Americans looked for set-piece battles, but the North Vietnamese were not about to accommodate them.³

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 265, 266.

²Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 335.

³Fall, Two Viet-Nams, pp. 345-349, 380.

The French had had a weapons monopoly in aviation and armor. Making the best of that situation, the Viet Minh transferred the war to a level that nullified the French edge in weaponry. The Viet Minh were mobile, fast-moving; their troops were dispersed, able to attack a French military unit and fade into the jungle. Despite the lesson inherent in the history of France in Vietnam, American military planners relied (overrelied, Fall felt) on big weapons and large, usually unwieldy troop contingents.¹

Fall returned often to the theme of de-emphasizing the purely military aspects of the war. He maintained that the real need was for improvements in the physical, moral and political conditions of ordinary Vietnamese. He considered the U.S. failure to press Diem for meaningful reforms and the neglect of the political features of the insurgency major shortcomings of the American intervention.²

In 1964, after Diem had been removed from the scene, Fall looked back on a decade that had been marked by too much enthusiasm for Diem and inadequate appraisals of the deterioration in South Vietnam; by faith in old ideas about pacification and population control and not enough consideration of how to win short of all-out military action.³

The effect of the U.S. interventionary policy was that, by 1964, the Vietnamese war was in "the shadowland between unattainable victory and unacceptable surrender."⁴ Fall saw these policy options: 1)

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 233.

²Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 382.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 270.

⁴Fall, "Our Options," The Reporter, p. 22.

Withdraw American troops at a given date, regardless of the outcome.

2) Continue the existing "proxy war" for as long as an additional ten years. 3) Turn the war into a conventional battle, with full-size combat operations against North Vietnam and perhaps the People's Republic of China. 4) Negotiate with the enemy, but from a position of strength.¹

Fall favored the last option. Its essence was a kind of American saber-rattling in the cause of peace. It envisaged freeing North Vietnam from a threat from China in exchange for cessation of guerrilla warfare in the South. Fall's was the proposal of an intelligent moderate; it was neither particularly hawkish nor dovish.

Hawks among American policy-makers soon ruled the day, however. Moderate approaches to a solution in Vietnam lost out in 1965 to the introduction of large numbers of American combat troops and warplanes. The war became more nearly the conventional battle Fall hoped could have been avoided.

Fall lamented the "enormity" of the American commitment, especially as it related to the air bombardment within South Vietnam.

What changed the character of the Vietnam war was not the decision to bomb North Vietnam; not the decision to use American ground troops in South Vietnam; but the decision to wage unlimited aerial warfare inside the country at the price of literally pounding the place to bits.²

The war had turned impersonal, callous, beyond a human scale. Fall decried the torture of prisoners and other violations of the rules of war. In interviews with American commanders he found little knowledge of the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Convention on War Victims.

¹Fall, "Our Options," The Reporter, pp. 18, 19.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 299.

Fall seemed at once awe-struck and depressed by the influx of American firepower and manpower. They made the war, in the short run, militarily unlosable. The magnitude of the U.S. role invalidated past comparisons with French activities in Vietnam. On September 24, 1965, American bombers (excluding B52s) delivered more bomb tonnage than the French Air Force did during the 56-day battle of Dien Bien Phu.

The reliance on American firepower, Fall predicted, would lead to a South Vietnam plowed under by bombers and artillery. And still it would be without sound political leadership.¹ He recommended in late 1965 that the air war against North Vietnam be de-escalated ("little would be lost militarily") and that negotiations take place without conditions. The notion that the war could be shortened by bombing the North was an illusion, he thought. As in Korea, the North's transportation system could survive on the strength of human coolies.

In spite of the military escalation in 1965 and '66 and the fact that the conflict had become in most respects an American war against North Vietnam, Fall insisted that it still was a Vietnamese war. On that basis, he kept arguing for alternative policies. Eighty percent of South Vietnamese lived in rice paddies; it was here, Fall contended, that a solution to the Vietnam problem lay.³ He wrote in 1966:

A major attempt must be made to 'politicize' rather than to further 'militarize' the Vietnamese conflict and to treat it as what it really is--a local conflict with outside support which has gotten out of hand, not the Stalingrad or El-Alamein of a world-wide cold-war confrontation.

¹Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 301, 305, 306.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 326, 330.

³Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 344.

He urged that attempts be made to induce the National Liberation Front and the South Vietnamese government to think in terms of a South Vietnamese political solution. The United States and North Vietnam were to recede into the background.

It would indeed be a pity if so much ingenuity, diplomacy, blood and treasure should have been spent on trying to persuade Hanoi to abandon the insurgents in South Viet-Nam, without a solid attempt ever having been made at getting the insurgents to modify their relationship with Hanoi in return for a specifically South Vietnamese solution that could be as honorable all around as it would be realistic. The only alternative to such an approach would be a further escalation both in terms of battleground and participating countries. . . .¹

Of course, no such meeting of minds in South Vietnam took place. The NLF was not recognized and dealt with as a potentially constructive political force, as Fall suggested it should be. And the non-communist Vietnamese body politic was not restored to health, also as he prescribed.² Instead, American military planners, ignorant of the strength and resolve of their Vietnamese adversaries, held sway. Their ignorance was relieved by the Tet Offensive in 1968. After that, a dramatic alteration of American policy in Vietnam occurred. By then, Fall had been dead a year.

¹Bernard Fall, "Viet Nam in the Balance," Foreign Affairs, XLV (October, 1966), 16-18.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, pp. 345, 346.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

The Pentagon Papers add important details to the history of American intervention in Vietnam. They corroborate much of the literature about the intervention and illuminate the attitudes and goals that underlay it. They show that the guiding principle was constant through four administrations: A non-communist regime was to be set up in South Vietnam and communist "aggressors" were to be defeated.¹

Careful reading of the Papers reveals facts that belie some of the official pronouncements made at the time. For example, the Papers indicate that when the United States escalated its involvement in February, 1965, policy-makers knew of no regular North Vietnamese Army units in South Vietnam. Five months later there still was speculation as to whether North Vietnamese soldiers were in or near South Vietnam. Meantime, however, American government officials were contending that U.S. troops were defending South Vietnam from an armed attack from the North.

Anything in the Pentagon Papers that tends to discredit the official line is there in spite of rather than because of the efforts of the authors. Although the analysts who prepared the Papers seem to have agreed in general that U.S. intervention in Vietnam may have been a

¹Noam Chomsky, "The Pentagon Papers as Propaganda and as History," The Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel Edition, V, eds., Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 179, 190, 196.

costly error, they were far from being doves. They operated within the framework of the official anti-communist ideology and treated government assertions as fact.

One reason the Papers give for resuming the bombing campaigns after the Tet, 1967, truce was that North Vietnam moved supplies into its southern panhandle. Yet American military leaders moved troops during the truce and set a one-day record for the amount of cargo air-delivered to soldiers in the field. This the government analysts ignored, even though a few journalists (led by I. F. Stone) reported it at the time.¹

Thus one shortcoming of the Pentagon Papers as history is the pro-government bias that resulted from the affiliation of the analysts, who were part of the government establishment or staff members of think-tanks with close ties to it. The chairman of the Defense Department task force that authored the Papers, Leslie Gelb, noted the deficiency: "The people who worked on the Task Force were superb. . . . Of course, we all had our prejudices and axes to grind and these shine through clearly at times. . . ."

Gelb also addressed himself to the ground rules of the project. Analysts had access to almost all Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency files and to some State Department materials. They had no access to the White House. Personal interviews were prohibited; only documents were used.

This approach to research was bound to lead to distortions, and distortions we are sure abound in these studies.
To bring the documents to life, to fill in gaps, and just

¹Chomsky, pp. 184, 185, 189, 196.

to see what the 'outside world' was thinking, we turned to newspapers, periodicals, and books. We never used these sources to supplant the classified documents, but only to supplement them.¹

(The analysts used the book "To Move a Nation," by Roger Hilsman, to develop their account of how Diem was removed from office and killed. Hilsman was director of the State Department bureau of intelligence and research from 1961-63 and assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs from 1963-64.)²

So the Pentagon Papers are a distillation of the documentary record, and the assumptions of the documents are carried over. Yet their pro-government orientation does not invalidate the Papers as useful resources for students of American intervention so long as the students appreciate their special character. In a way, this one-sidedness is appropriate, for it is both a symptom and a symbol of the mind-set that prevailed among American policy-makers. It was a mind-set that, as Bernard Fall noted, enabled unwarranted optimism to become an integral part of the interventionist policy.

It was this dangerous optimism that Fall tried to correct with facts. He did not gather his facts only from documents in Washington but traveled to both Vietnams and talked with principals on both sides of the conflict. He interviewed North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong in Hanoi in 1962. In 1958, he examined complaints to the International

¹U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Hearing, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess., September 20, 1971 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), p. ix.

²Neil Sheehan and others, The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 168.

Control Commission against South Vietnam and concluded that there was some coordination between the Viet Minh rebels and North Vietnam. When writing of the counter-insurgency program, Fall stressed that his assessment was based on "known and verifiable facts alone," not on personal opinion or wishful thinking, which he felt tainted other assessments.¹

Fall's determination to think independently and his apparent indefatigability gave objectivity and thoroughness to his description of Vietnam and of the impact the French and Americans had on it. Fall viewed Vietnam comprehensively. He considered the plight of the peasants, the special interests of various social and cultural groups and the general economic interests of all Vietnamese. He recognized the need for a broad-based South Vietnamese government to deal with the country's basic problems.

In contrast, the Pentagon Papers deal with the formulation and execution of American policy (the major component of which was conventional military activity) within the context of a narrowly defined goal: to stop a so-called communist onslaught. After a while, the intervention sought to uphold America's prestige and world position. The cause of a free South Vietnam became secondary.

Fall attempted to convince U.S. policy-makers they were in error. He began in earnest after a trip to Vietnam in 1957, when he came back with "proof of the corruption within the Diem regime."² Few

¹Bernard Fall, Viet-Nam Witness (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 184, 290.

²Bernard Fall, Last Reflections on a War (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 10.

policy-makers listened, but Fall persisted. Bill Moyers, press secretary to President Johnson, related this anecdote:

I never met Fall, but in early 1966 my White House colleague, the late Hayes Redmon, did. One afternoon he announced: 'I have just talked to a man who says we are headed for catastrophe. He says that by becoming surrogates of colonialism in Indochina we have gone over to the wrong side of history.' Periodically, Redmon, a former Air Force officer who abhorred the war, would summarize Fall's articles and circulate them to associates. No policies changed, but a few eyes were opened gradually.¹

As South Vietnam was coming under North Vietnamese control in 1975, Moyers quoted Fall's wife to the effect that the late historian-political scientist considered such an outcome inevitable because of the superior spirit of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.²

Of course, there is a danger here of lionizing Fall. He was not omniscient, nor did he possess superhuman prescience. And his early writings have a tinge of pro-French bias despite his protests to the contrary and the fact that all his university education was obtained in the United States. Still, Fall combined a commitment to scholarship with a desire to put the results of his scholarship to work in policy-making. This is at the heart of the impulse to make political science more "relevant" and "action-oriented."

As Fall practiced it, political science was a problem-solving, question-answering discipline closely related to a real-world issue. He could have been expected to feel a kinship toward those who emphasize substance over technique in political science, who think the discipline

¹Bill Moyers, "Last Reflections on a War," Newsweek, April 21, 1975, p. 100.

²Moyers, p. 100.

should speak to real human needs, who believe knowledge must be applied.¹

Fall's knowledge was seldom, if ever, applied. The American policy-making establishment was selective in using facts about the war, and Fall's facts were unwelcome. Policy-makers were more comfortable with wishful thinkers who saw victory in just a little higher level of military activity. The result of this self-delusion was that the U.S. intervention in South Vietnam became--even before the 1970s--"one of the single most incredible failures of American foreign policy."²

It was an exceedingly costly failure. Between January 1, 1961, and April 13, 1974, 56,555 Americans died in Vietnam. Of these, 7,198 were blacks; 64 percent were 21 or younger. Dead officers totaled 6,892; dead enlisted men, 49,639. Deaths from non-hostile causes numbered 10,326, including 381 suicides. In January, 1976, the figures were updated and included casualties incurred in the Mayaguez incident (the seizure by Cambodians of an American ship). Total deaths then stood at 56,869.³

Vietnamese losses were higher. Civilian war casualties alone (killed or wounded) in South Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 have been put at 1.4 million. South Vietnamese refugees generated during that period totaled 10.3 million.⁴

¹David Easton, "The New Revolution in Political Science," American Political Science Review, LXIII (December, 1969), 1053.

²Fall, Viet-Nam Witness, p. 137.

³These are Department of Defense figures cited in Gloria Emerson, Winners and Losers (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 58, 59.

⁴These figures were prepared by a project of the American Friends Service Committee (Emerson, p. 357).

The American intervention also was costly in terms of dollars and cents. Between 1950 and 1974, United States economic and military assistance to Vietnam amounted to \$23.9 billion: \$16.1 billion in military assistance, \$7.8 billion in economic aid.¹

Intervention was expensive in a less quantifiable way, too. Domestically, it was extremely divisive. It had class and racial overtones: A disproportionate share of the fighting was done by poor whites and blacks. It created a gulf between the young and the old. Vietnam came to symbolize the lack of faith youths had in the older generation. Internationally, the intervention was condemned as an ugly imperialistic venture.

Monetary and social costs of intervention were not foreseen, however. When they were seen the intervention had reached an advanced stage, had gradually evolved as the product of a decision-making process influenced by many factors. Among them were the personalities of American leaders and their perceptions of their roles in government, and the realities of the international system: in short, the individual, role and systemic variables discussed in Chapter 1.

The potency of individual variables is illustrated in this excerpt from a report by James Reston of the New York Times on the 1961 Vienna conference between President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev. It suggests that Kennedy's defeat at the Bay of Pigs caused him to enlarge the American commitment in Vietnam.

A few minutes after this meeting President Kennedy told me that apparently Khrushchev had decided that 'anybody stupid

¹U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 319.

enough to get involved in that situation (Bay of Pigs) was immature, and anybody who didn't see it through was timid and, therefore, could be bullied.'

Kennedy then dispatched 12,000 American troops to Vietnam despite warnings from his advisers that his actions were contrary to earlier statements about avoiding an Asian land war.¹ Did Kennedy escalate the American intervention to show Khrushchev that he was tough and could not be bullied? That may well have entered into his decision.

President Johnson did not regard himself as a weakling either. As president, he could not picture himself leading the United States in a retreat. He thought more and more military pressure was the answer. Johnson felt confined by his own restrictions on the war (to keep it within South Vietnam, for instance) and secretly plotted for expansion.

Johnson's ally was General Westmoreland. Both were committed to winning, at least before the Tet Offensive. Because running the war was left largely up to the military, and because the public was not aroused by events in Vietnam until late in the game, Johnson and Westmoreland had virtually free rein. They were responsible for the most dramatic phase of the intervention, the introduction of large numbers of combat troops and the bombing of North Vietnam.

The structure of the international system (loose bipolarity: two blocs vying for members) facilitated intervention. The woeful instability of South Vietnam invited it; the greater the instability of a nation the greater the likelihood of intervention by an external power. And the ideological rivalry the war represented enhanced the interventionists'

¹Alfred Steinberg, Sam Johnson's Boy (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 752.

belief in the rightness of their cause--the more so as the war was perceived to have been instigated by an external power. Policy-makers justified increasingly drastic measures as necessary to preserve democracy against communism.

In fact, the power blocs might have done better to have left Vietnam alone, to have left it relatively uncommitted. It could have been a necessary buffer between the blocs. Uncommitted nations are important as mediators in the loose bipolar model of the international system. Even today, Vietnam, though in the communist bloc, is not aligning itself too closely with either the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China.

But the hands-off treatment was not to be, and Vietnam's history has been one of persistent outside interference. The impact of American interventionists began to be felt in 1950 when policy-makers rejected Ho Chi Minh in favor of supporting the French war against the Viet Minh. From that point the American interventionist policy evolved through a number of identifiable stages.

These can be summarized by adapting James Rosenau's operational definition of intervention (a convention-breaking phenomenon that is authority-oriented). Rosenau's concept connotes sharp beginnings and clearcut endings that do not perfectly fit the history of American intervention in Vietnam up to mid-1968. Nonetheless, the break-with-the-past idea is useful in discussing watershed events, and practically all the interventionist activities were political, aimed at decision-makers and government processes.

Adopting the position of passive observer at the Geneva conference in 1954 at once limited the ability of American policy-makers to

shape a peace and left them freer to disregard the provisions of the agreement. This arms-length attitude and irrational fear of communist influence caused the United States to embrace Diem and his separatist tendencies rather than working for a unified Vietnam.

The United States accepted Diem's decision to reject a plebiscite in 1956. Thereafter, the American goal was to preserve a non-communist state in South Vietnam. The concomitant U.S. readiness to apply force made a confrontation with North Vietnam and insurgents in the South inevitable. Not that U.S. policy-makers realized or acknowledged this. The Vietnamese rebels were not taken seriously; nor did the glaring faults of the Diem government receive needed attention. Thus did American leaders end the 1950s in a state of dangerous ignorance.

A further step into the quagmire was taken early in President Kennedy's administration when Kennedy ordered Special Forces and more advisers to South Vietnam. He showed his willingness to go far beyond the restrictions of the Geneva accord. More recommendations for additional American troops followed, as did some unsuccessful counter-insurgency programs and a growing disenchantment with Diem. In a sense, August 21, 1963, can be labeled a crucial date, for it was then that Diem ordered his special police to raid Buddhist pagodas, finally convincing American leaders that the dictator had to go.

What if an alternative to Diem had been found years before? The need for an alternative had been evident for a long time. It is almost painful to speculate on this might-have-been. Surely the South Vietnamese and their American helpers could have done no worse.

With the advent of the Johnson administration, the American emphasis on a military build-up intensified, even as the political

instability and military deterioration within South Vietnam continued. Johnson expanded the war, turned it northward and made it effectively an American undertaking. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August, 1964, was a critical step into deeper involvement. It gave Johnson a virtual blank check to increase military activities against North Vietnam, especially air raids.

An influx of American ground troops was next in the escalation. In 1965, the American military went on the offensive in the fullest sense. Yet results still were unsatisfactory, and questions gradually arose among American policy-makers. From 1966 on, doves, hawks and middle-of-the-roaders made up three policy-making camps.

In 1968, the Tet Offensive brought all policy-makers up short. The bankruptcy of the American intervention became clearer than it had ever been. President Johnson saw that a change was imperative. In late March, he took himself out of the race for re-election, and announced a partial bombing halt and just a token increase in troops.

Johnson acted not only out of the realization that military means would not bring about the political ends sought, but also out of the knowledge that American citizens would not tolerate an open-ended, ever larger war. These two facts were central to the failure of the American intervention in Vietnam. Military tactics could not overcome the politicized Vietnamese revolutionaries, so Americans withdrew their support.

Effective military power requires not only the technological capability to fight but also the material, political and psychological support of the society from which the military power springs. The society legitimizes the military. A relatively high degree of military

legitimacy was possible before the Vietnam war because of the clearer perception of the combatants and of their causes. In Vietnam, however, ambiguities abounded because of the political-psychological nature of the war. The legitimacy of the military was undermined.

Responses to this type of (revolutionary guerrilla) warfare require professional flexibility, institutional adaptation, political astuteness and understanding on the part of civilian and military leaders. In essence, such a response required a restructuring of traditional civil-military relationships--not an easy adjustment for any society, nor one that is necessarily desired.¹

In short, Americans, to their credit, could not adjust to the demands of the "limited" war in Vietnam that looked less and less limited. Many began to see a contradiction in a modern democratic society fighting against highly motivated revolutionaries in defense of an undemocratic puppet government. The war began to seem immoral, and the deaths of many Americans intolerably wasteful.

Disenchantment with the U.S. intervention was present among members of the military, too. A survey of 173 Army generals who commanded in Vietnam showed more than fifty percent thought, in September, 1974, that U.S. troops should not have participated in combat. Fifty-three percent of the generals had a negative assessment of the U.S. combat role. (Note that this was before the final rout of the South Vietnamese in April, 1975.)²

The generals used some hindsight, of course; they were too fearful of destroying their careers to speak out earlier. But observations

¹ Sam C. Sarkesian, "Revolution and the Limits of Military Power: The Haunting Specter of Vietnam," Social Science Quarterly, LVI (March, 1976), 674, 676, 677.

² Douglas Kinnard, The War Managers (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977), pp. 154, 158.

about the futility of the American intervention were possible without hindsight. They were offered by critics during the whole course of the war. One of the most accurate critics was Bernard Fall.

Yet trial and error more nearly characterized U.S. policy than did reasoned approaches based on facts. Eventually, the conclusion that nothing worked was unavoidable. An American who was a civilian official in Vietnam expressed it concisely:

I got a very clear picture that American policy in Vietnam was wrong. Because it didn't work and because it couldn't work and because whatever there was to gain or to lose, it was perfectly clear the longer you prolonged it the more was lost.¹

American policy in Vietnam was based on the false assumption of a monolithic communist aggression directed at taking over all of Indochina domino-style. In fact, more important was nationalistic zeal on the part of the victorious Vietnamese and a commitment to rid their country of Westerners. Because American tactics were geared to the false assumption rather than the reality, they failed. In the end, all the U.S. had worked for in Vietnam was lost.

¹Emerson, p. 325.

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